
The transition to an agricultural way of life in the sandy lowland of Belgium

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Résumé

Until recently the neolithisation process in Belgium focused almost exclusively on the loamy areas of Middle Belgium, with the study of the LBK and the Michelsberg cultures. These studies have demonstrated that the introduction of domesticated plants and animals was a rapid process, most likely resulting from migration of early farmers from the Central European loess areas as early as 5300 cal BC. On the other hand, research in the sandy lowlands of Northern Belgium was limited until the recent fortuitous discovery of a number of well-preserved wetland sites in the Lower-Scheldt floodplain (Doel, Bazel, Melsele). For the first time, these discoveries offer the opportunity to investigate the neolithisation process and thus possible contacts between indigenous hunter-gatherers and adjacent farmer-herders throughout the 5th and 4th millennium cal BC. This paper will present the first results of a multidisciplinary analysis of these wetland sites, focusing on the study of lithic artefacts and ceramics from a typological, technological and functional perspective. These sites have yielded remains of the southernmost expansion of the final Mesolithic Swifterbant culture, the last hunter-gatherers of the region, and the subsequent Middle Neolithic Michelsberg culture, representing the first local farming societies. The so far obtained data clearly indicate that, compared to the loess region, the transition to an agro-pastoral economy was a late and gradual process resulting from increased contact and exchange with farmers. Contact probably started in the first half of the 5th millennium with the exchange of "exotic" pottery, non-local flint raw materials and cereal grains, followed by the local production of indigenous pottery. The economic turnover dates to the second half of the 5th millennium from at least 4300 cal BC onwards, with the first hard evidence of local agriculture and stock-breeding.

Mots-Clés: Mesolithic, Neolithic, neolithization, lithics, ceramics, Swifterbant culture, Belgium

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